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SUBJECT: NEW SWISS FEDERAL COUNCILOR DIDIER BURKHALTER

¶11. (SBU) Summary: A joint session of the Swiss Parliament on September 16 elected Council of States (Upper House) Member Didier Burkhalter to replace Pascal Couchepin on the Federal Council (Swiss Executive Cabinet). The special mid-term election was scheduled after Couchepin announced earlier this year that he would retire on November 1. A member of the Swiss Free Democratic Party (FDP), Burkhalter's election ensures that the FDP will continue to hold two of the seven Federal Council seats. It is not clear whether Burkhalter will assume Couchepin's portfolio as Minister of Home Affairs (covering Health, Science, Social, and Education issues), but it appears likely. Burkhalter is a reputed centrist in the socially and fiscally conservative FDP. He does not favor Switzerland joining the EU, but does support the idea of Swiss participation in the EU's anti-piracy mission Atalanta, which currently is under debate in the Swiss Parliament. Post does not anticipate that Burkhalter's replacing Couchepin on the Federal Council will have significant implications for U.S.-Swiss relations. End Summary.

FDP DEFENDS SEAT FROM CVP

¶12. (SBU) A joint session of the Swiss Parliament on September 16 elected Council of States (Upper House) Member Didier Burkhalter to replace Pascal Couchepin on the Federal Council (Swiss Executive Cabinet). The special mid-term election was scheduled after Couchepin announced earlier this year that he would retire on November 1. With 129 votes in his favor, out of a total of 239 votes cast in the fourth round of voting, Burkhalter surpassed the absolute majority needed to win the seat on the Federal Council. Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP) candidate Urs Schwaller came in second with 106 votes.

¶13. (SBU) Burkhalter's victory allowed the FDP to defend its second seat on the Federal Council from a challenge by the CVP, which, together with some smaller parties, forms a 52-seat voting block in the full 246 seat Parliament (Upper and Lower House), compared to the FDP's 47 seats. The FDP bases its claim to two seats essentially on the fact that it represents approximately 3-percent more of the Swiss electorate than the CVP, according to the results of the 2007 parliamentary elections. At the end of the day, however, tactical considerations of the other parties continue to give the FDP the edge in holding on to its second seat. The Greens (24 seats), for example, have never had a party member elected to the Federal Council. They apparently have calculated that, should the Green party's electoral fortunes continue to rise in the 2011 parliamentary elections, it would be easier for them to win one of two Federal Council seats away from the FDP in future elections than to unseat a center-left CVP member.

BURKHALTER SWORN IN, PORTFOLIO TO BE DETERMINED

14. (SBU) Burkhalter was sworn into office on September 16, shortly after his election to the Federal Council. It is not clear whether Burkhalter will assume Couchepin's portfolio as Minister of Home Affairs (covering Health, Science, Social, and Education issues), but it appears likely, since none of the more senior Federal Council members have indicated publicly a desire to change their current areas of responsibilities. The distribution of ministerial portfolios among the seven Federal Councilors is to be discussed at the next regular Federal Council meeting on September 18. Burkhalter is expected to assume his Federal Council duties on November 1.

15. (SBU) Though not new to national politics, Burkhalter's views on international affairs are relatively unknown. While in Parliament, he has served on the Council of States Committee for Science, Education, and Culture -- all experience relevant to the Home Affairs portfolios of outgoing Federal Councilor Couchepin. Regarding the ever present, often emotional issue of Swiss-EU relations, Burkhalter reportedly does not favor Switzerland joining the EU. He does, however, support the proposal for Swiss participation in the EU's anti-piracy mission Atalanta, which currently is under debate in the Swiss Parliament. Post does not anticipate that Burkhalter's replacing Couchepin on the Federal Council will have significant implications for U.S.-Swiss relations.

BIOGRAPHIC NOTES ON DIDIER BURKHALTER

16. (U) The 49-year-old Burkhalter is from the French-speaking part of Switzerland. In addition to French, he is fluent in German, and reportedly also speaks English. He is an economist by background, and has substantial experience in government administration at the communal and cantonal levels. From 1991 to 2005, he was a City Councilor in Neuenburg, and during that time served three times as Mayor. From 1990-2001 he also held a seat in the Neuchatel Cantonal Parliament. From 2003-2007, he served as a National Councilor in the Federal Parliament. Burkhalter was elected in 2007 to the Council of States of the Parliament, where he served until his election September 16 to the Federal Council. Burkhalter is a reputed centrist in the socially and fiscally conservative FDP. As a native French-speaker from Western Switzerland, Burkhalter's election maintains the current regional-linguistic balance on the Federal Council. He is the father of three sons and his wife is Austrian.

BEYER